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Communication

AN ECHO FROM THE ERA OF THE TASSEMENTS.

A contribution to the December number of the Indiana Magazine of History, entitled "The Meaning of Tassinong," invites the undersigned to present his authority for applying the old French word *tassement* to the simple log structures of old French trading posts, or palisaded shops, where furs were obtained from the Indians in exchange for various articles of trade. I take pleasure in responding to the invitation contained in that article, especially since I have been indebted to its author, in past years, for kindly and valuable aid on more than one difficult point in Indiana's ancient history. I waive the fact that the invitation is presented in a manner to which I am little accustomed, and I attribute the author's playfulness in part to the freedom of an old-time acquaintance.

For critical purposes relating to French historical and literary matters of old time, I find the work of Celestin Hippeau (1803-1883) indispensable; for it seeks to do what has not been done by any other lexicographer of the language, so far as I know. It seeks to give the status, in centuries gone, of old French words, and to condense in two volumes of convenient size the substance of great works which are rare, expensive, and inconvenient; to give what the student would otherwise have to search for in the Dictionaries of Roquefort, De Burguy, and Du Cagne, and in various partial lexicons.

The first volume of Hippeau's work was issued in 1866; the second, in 1873. The work was published in Paris by Auguste Aubry, of 18 Rue Seguier, who issued also seventeen other volumes of historical, literary and educational criticism (all remarkable) by Hippeau, together with seven valuable literary compends by him.

In the second volume of Hippeau's *Dictionnaire* on page 132, is found the word *tassement*, it being in the class of words which had come into use before the close of the thirteenth century. It is, therefore, at least, over six hundred years old, and it is still in use,

with no change in the spelling or in the pronunciation, and still relates in a way to buildings (with a technical meaning known especially to architects), though the old palisades have passed away.

To this word our historical lexicographer gives but a single meaning. He defines it *palissade*.

Hippeau connects the word with *tas*, *tasse*, or *tassel*, meaning, as he says, *rassemblement*, *assemblage de plusieurs objets*; also (a peculiar usage, I think) *touffe d'arbres*. Tassement has been associated by others with *tas*, *tasque*, and *tasche*, meaning a pocket or a sack or purse carried at the belt. The pocket or swung purse of the workman or housewife, in centuries gone, contained many articles not now carried around in clothing. Hence *tassement*, it would seem, came to convey the idea of an assortment of serviceable things, such as were to be found in a trader's establishment. But the idea of a palisade was the first and dominant one expressed by the word, and our lexicographer gives no other meaning than this.

When the Count de St. Chamas (a native of Paris, long resident at the court of Cairo, with whom I sustained an intimate acquaintance for a decade in Chicago) was about to start, seven years ago, upon his journey around the world, he came to me and gave me, as a parting present (the last of many generous gifts), the great *Grammaire des Grammaires* and the two volumes of Hippeau's *Dictionnaire*. Of the latter he said, "I give these to you, *mon ami*, because I know that you will appreciate them and *use* them." He had often seen me ransacking *Larousse* and *La Grande Encyclopedie*.

Where were the *tassements* of the French in the third century back? The greatest line of *tassements* in history (with which Hippeau was so familiar) was the line built from Quebec to New Orleans.

The scanty records remaining tell of the more prominent of these; but there must have been, in the colonial period, many a modest *tassement* of French traders all unknown to fame, and hundreds of crudely-drawn maps or tracings of routes that were never engraved for books or even copied in enduring manuscripts. The heroic colonial age of the west was largely characterized by individual daring, enterprise, endurance and achievement, un-

recorded, and lost even to family legend and popular tradition by the changes of sovereignty and of population.

What remains, even of vague, dim legend, should be treasured, especially where it is fortified very strongly by the evidence which a perpetuated name supplies.

The writer of the December contribution mentioned above seeks to derive the name "Tassinong" from an Indian word meaning plum, and presents the matter ingeniously. Such a derivation would involve the substitution of the sound of "n" for that of "m" (which I do not regard as a serious matter); but it presents other phonetic difficulties, which to me seem to be of a serious nature.

That writer's opinion is entitled to respectful consideration; but it seems to ignore the following facts, to say nothing of the inherent probability that some modest *tassement* of an early French trader, unknown to fame, existed in the neighborhood of Tassinong in the old French days (a probability that does not appeal to the contributor):

1. The fact that the tradition of the place, often told by the early settlers, and by them received from the Indians, was that a very old French trading establishment had existed there, of which not a splinter remained.

2. The fact that a word such as the French spelled *tassement*, varied perhaps in a single small particular (by the exchanging of an "m" sound for an "n" sound), was orally handed down through generations of Indians (who were in no way chargeable with the spelling, since they did not write the word, but only spoke it).

3. The fact that the earliest settlers, having acquired the very old name orally, from the Indians, gave its final syllable the French nasal sound (pronouncing "nong" as a very nasal "naw," and thrusting out their lips in the effort), to the later amusement of their children and grandchildren.

4. The fact that "Grove" was not a part of the Indian name, and was probably used only informally and by only a very few persons. I never heard of it before in this connection.

5. The fact that the minor *tassements* of the French did not always have names. Even Vincennes was long known simply as the "Poste," having no other name.

6. The fact that the more modest palisades would not likely be spoken of as *postes* (which would denote an official character),

but would more naturally be called by another and more generic name. Probably the legendary trading house at Tassinong was wholly a private affair, and never had any official designation (or character, other than the license of the trader would presuppose if he had one). Duluth, I learn, had neither a license nor a name for his *tassement* in Minnesota.

Since the Indians who transmitted the old name orally were not responsible for the spelling of "Tassinong" (which bears the earmarks of some one who understood the old conventional English rendering of the French syllable "ment"), that counts for little.

The principles of French syllabication are so well established that I should not think of arguing them. When any one tells me that French words like *tassement*, *nullement*, *tellement*, etc., etc., have but two syllables, I respectfully refer him to a competent professor of French.

In dealing with a light French syllable, Americans either fortify it or else ignore it. It may be remarked that "Tassinong" (unlike Prattville, which must be pronounced in two syllables, or Calumet, which must be pronounced in three) happens to contain a resonant liquid, the sound of "n"; and while I have been familiar with the name from babyhood, I could scarcely tell now, in hundreds of cases, whether the speaker using it is making one or two syllables of it. Happily, the oral pronunciation handed down presents no problem of syllables, at all.

In my preceding paper I did not urge the antecedent and inherent probability that the hunters' and trappers' paradise in my native county of Porter, north of the Kankakee, on the route taken by the first recorded incursion of the French into Indiana (La Salle's, 1679) should contain, within the French period, at least a modest and unnamed *tassement*. Yet this did appeal very strongly to a gentleman well acquainted with Smithsonian work in archaeology, and well posted in our colonial history, who took me to task somewhat severely, several years ago, for not making an effort to locate such a trading establishment. So strongly was he impressed with the inherent probability of its one-time existence (though he knew nothing at all of Tassinong), that he was concerned only as to its location. I looked, in Hippeau, for *tassement*, as an original form for the conventionalized "Tassinong," and found it with the mutation of a single letter, in *tassement*.

My purpose has not been to attempt anything sensational, but, as a conscientious duty, to contribute what I might of historical criticism relating to the region north of the Kankakee, so much neglected by writers of Indiana history. I presumed that the distinguished writer of the December contribution was acquainted with Hippeau and perhaps also with the *Dictionaries* of De Burguy, Roquefort, and Du Cange, which Hippeau so cleverly epitomized for our convenience.

While I perhaps had no right to assume this of so busy a gentleman, and may have overestimated his acquaintance with authorities on old French, it would be difficult for any one to overestimate his painstaking diligence in arresting the influence of impudent or careless historical impositions, and in sifting the great mass of materials, often very perplexing, which he has handled. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at that his feelings cause him, at times, to make use of exclamation points, and to demand facts and authorities in a somewhat undiplomatic way.

I am delighted to learn from him that the name "Tassinong" still appears on recent maps of Porter county. I hope it will long remain. Unless it shall be discovered elsewhere in current cartography, I shall be glad to feel that Porter county possesses, in a conventionalized form, the last remaining cartographic use of a name so full of heroic and romantic suggestiveness as attaches to the word *tassement* in old and historic French.

HUBERT M. SKINNER.